DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 280 997 CE 046 798

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TITLE A Study of Attitudes Associated with Retraining. Part II. Work Resource and Retraining Initiative.
INSTITUTION National Association of Broadcasters, Washington, D.C.
SPONS AGENCY Economic Development Administration (DOC), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE Mar 87
NOTE 23p.; A product of the Broadcasting Industry Productivity Council. For part I, see CE 049 797.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Dislocated Workers; *Educational Needs; *Job Training; Postsecondary Education; Program Development; *Retraining; *Skill Obsolescence; *Work Attitudes

ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to gain insight into how to persuade those in fields where job opportunities are declining to take advantage of existing retraining programs in order to avoid future displacement. Research was conducted through a series of focus groups in Chicago, Louisville, and Davenport. Participants in these sessions included men and women representing a range of ages, ethnicity, and work backgrounds. All had either been employed with the same company or worked at the same type of job for 10 years or more, and none had received any additional formal education or training since entering the work force. The study found the following: (1) many of the workers did not so much choose as fall into their occupations; (2) most do not really like their jobs; (3) they have a limited perspective of the workplace and their potential in it; (4) they have a short-term perspective--judging a job on the basis of the hourly rate rather than as a career path; (5) they are risk adverse--seniority is perceived as a safety net, making it difficult to consider changing jobs; and (6) although they know that many others have been displaced, they raise barriers to retraining. The study concluded that in order to break down these barriers, retraining programs must take the problem down to the personal level, confront specific problems and concerns, assure a short time frame, talk in terms of options and opportunities, and create a central source of help and information. The findings of the study will be used to create radio and television public service announcements to help persons who are displaced or have limited skills to retrain before being faced with displacement. (KC)

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National Association of NAB BROADCASTERS

The Broadcasting Industry Productivity Council

Work Resource and Retraining Initiative

ED280997

A STUDY OF ATTITUDES ASSOCIATED WITH RETRAINING

PART II

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

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OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this study was to gain an insight into how to persuade those in fields where job opportunities are declining to take advantage of existing retraining programs in order to avoid future displacement.

It builds upon a previous study that explored retraining from the perspective of those who had already experienced it.

These two studies will be used to assist in the creation of radio and television public service announcements and related editorial material to help those already displaced and encourage those with obsolete or limited skills to retrain before it becomes a necessity.

METHODOLOGY

In January, 1987, a series of group interviews, commonly known as "focus" groups, were conducted in three cities: Chicago, Louisville and Davenport.

Participants recruited for these sessions included men and women representing a range of ages, ethnicity and work backgrounds. All had either been employed with the same company or worked at the same type of job for ten years or more and none had received any additional formal education or training since entering the work force.

LIMITATIONS AND USES

The focus group is a widely employed research format used by advertising agencies and market analysists. The technique involves interviewing ten to fifteen people simultaneously, with a moderator leading the group in a relatively free discussion about the topic under consideration. They are an excellent tool for better understanding consumer language, the range of consumer response and experience, and for generating hypotheses. They do, however, represent a small and interactive set of respondents and are more subjective in nature than is quantitative research.

REVIEW OF PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Those who undertake retraining before it becomes a necessity will find their task a much easier one. However, too often "vulnerable" individuals wait too long, not antiticpating that their job/company may be in danger or thinking it won't happen to them.

Then retraining becomes a necessity rather than a choice. Pressed to earn a living, to take any job; their perspective becomes short-term rather than long-term.

To be worthwhile, retraining must be undertaken with a positive frame of mind. To do this, most individuals must overcome a number of psychological and emotional barriers:

- Disbelief. Even after the fact of losing a job, thinking the company/job will come back; not letting go of the past.

- Guilt. The burden of feeling a personal failure; that it is something her or she did wrong rather than a broader situation permeating American life.

- Isolation. The feeling that no one else has the problem.

- Unfamiliarity. Lack of information about the help and options that are available.

- Pride. Even when aware of programs, the feeling that to use them would be humiliating and represent taking welfare or charity. That he or she should be able to handle this problem without assistance.

- Fear. Fear of starting over; of going back to a learning situation; of failure. This fear can paralyse a person and make him or her unwilling to take another risk.

Overcoming these barriers, especially in the current environment, requires tremendous courage on the part of individuals:

- To realize they are not being pessimists, but realists; that a change has to be made.
- To be willing to accept the challenge of starting anew. To look ahead, not back.
- To absolve any sense of guilt, to understand that what is happening to them is part of a broader picture and beyond their control.
- To see the opportunity that this negative situation presents.
- To establish personal support systems that will help overcome stress and fear.
- To work through the maze and learn what programs exist and how they apply to them.

PART II - THE VULNERABLE WORKER

I. ATTITUDES

Change will be a central feature of the job market in coming years as companies introduce new technologies, streamline production, consolidate capacity and eliminate outmoded facilities.

This phase of the study focused on those workers most vulnerable to these changes: individuals for whom retraining is an option today, but may be a necessity tomorrow.

To begin each discussion session, participants were asked introduce themselves to each other and briefly describe their current job and work history.

As these people talked, we began to see some patterns emerge:

- Many didn't so much choose their occupation as fall into it. In fact, many are still with the first company they worked for and are often doing much the same type of work they started at.

> "After I came out of school, this was the first job I went to. It was just luck. My brother was working there and he told me they were hiring, and I came out and got the job."
>
> "I'm lucky. I've been in one place at lot of years, 34 years in March. When I was going to high school, I was an orderly at the Baptist Hospital. I worked about nine months for an oil company. Then I went to where I am now."
>
> "I got out of school and knew somebody who worked there. He asked me if I wanted a job. I said yes. I didn't have to apply or anything. I've been there close to 15 years."
>
> "I went right into the factory and I've been there ever since. I'm an assembler. My first job there was more physical labor, clean-up, stamping the products to be shipped, just miscellaneous. Then I got this job. It's a bid system. I bid on the job and I've been doing it for 18 years."

- Most don't really like their job. "It's a living," but it affords them little, if any, happiness or self satisfaction.

  "I'm not really happy. I'd like to be doing something better."

  "I have never seen anybody happy with a job."

  "I wish I could have changed 30 years ago. That gentlemen, he spent 15 years of his life on a job and he's man enough to sit there and tell you that he wished he was somewhere else."

  "I just do my job and nobody bothers me and I don't bother nobody."

  "I don't think anybody here is really satisfied with their job."

  "The only time I'm happy is when I take a vacation."

- They have a limited perspective of the workplace and their potential in it. They define work as physical labor, tangible accomplishments, and discount mental work or desk jobs.

  "I like doing anything with my hands, anything constructive."

  "That's the trouble now. Too many people are just pushing paper around. The don't do anything, just push paper all day."

  "I couldn't sit in an office. I couldn't put on a tie and work 9 to 5. I don't want to have a box over me."

- Their perspective is also a short-term one. They judge a job primarily on the basis of the hourly rate they receive. They do not see the wisdom of taking a lower-paying job if even it has a longer career path, or of taking time off to train for a new job now despite the prospect of higher pay later.

  "If you're not going to make a dollar more on the hour after you retrain, you might as well stay with the lower paying job and you'll be working."

  "I'm qualified to be a packer, but it's less pay."

  "You try to train yourself in something that will make like cash money."

- Finally, they are risk adverse. Seniority is perceived as a safety net and the benefits they have accrued through long years of service make it difficult to consider changing. They are unwilling to sacrifice in the short term for better future expectations. The known — as unsatisfying as it may be — is preferred to the unknown.

> "The problem today, when you get to a certain age, when you're past 35 and you have a family, your major incentive is the security of the job because you want to know that's it's going to be there today, tomorrow and thereafter."
>
> "The longer you're at a place, the harder it is to leave. You build senority, vacation time, ten-year vested pensions, salary increases."
>
> "At the salary I'm getting now and the benefits, it's hard to change."

II. EXPECTATIONS

Like Scarlett O'Hara, the future is something they would just rather think about another day.

When asked about what they thought they would be doing five or ten years from now, it was as if this is an entirely new question, something they had not thought of before.

> "In five or ten years, maybe I'll be married and settled down. As far as work, I don't know."
>
> "The job I'm in now, I'll probably be stuck there unless I bid down to probably a lesser paying job."
>
> "I suppose I'll be there till they close down or I retire."
>
> "I take it day by day and leave it at that."

This is not to say that they are oblivious to their environment. They are aware of layoffs and plant closings. Nearly everyone has a friend who has been affected. They seem to understand that the rules of the workplace are changing; that there is really no such thing as job security any longer.

> "It's getting automated. And they're cutting the manpower back every chance they get; so it's quite a concern."
>
> "Automation is hitting pretty hard out there. They claim that the majority of people working at the plant right now, they just ride the storm out and with everyone retiring, it's just going to move everyone up. It's a process of elimination. It's really kind of scary in a way."
>
> "You don't know from one day to the next what's going to happen."
>
> "I've worried about it for four years. Right after they hired a big bunch of people, right after I got on, we started hearing the rumors about layoffs and we worried and worried and it took forever for them to do it."

III. BARRIERS

Despite what is happening to others, they feel compelled neither to anticipate nor plan for what may happen to them. They are more than ready to erect barriers when the subject of retraining is raised:

- They don't want to go back to "school":

  "I think it scares a lot of people. A lot of people feel, 'What am I going to learn?' I'm 50 years old. School is for kids."

  "I wouldn't enjoy going back. I see too much riff raff that's in school. The teachers, I don't think they're up to par in this state."

- It costs too much money.

  "I don't have that kind of money. You'll have to work the rest of your life to pay off the training."

  "If you're working and you need to be retrained, you can't afford it. If you're not working, you can't afford it again. Now I'm working. I can't afford to be retrained."

- It takes too much time.

  "There's no way I can do it. I was going to go to school; but with the hours I work, there's no way. Because most school is full time. You just can't. Some people do it; but the ones that do that, they're single. They don't have kids and they still have a hell of a time making that schedule."

  "I would not feel comfortable, like you're taking time away from your family and you're working. I work the graveyard shift. I never see my family anyway. If I was to take time out and go to classes, I wouldn't see my children for God know how long."

  "I get up at 5:30 in the morning to go to work. I travel 36 miles. I get home between 6:30 and 7:00. I rip out floors and bulkheads out of busses. I'm dirty, tired. And I don't want to go sit in a classroom for two hours. What I want to do when I get off work is go home, eat supper, drink two or three beers, watch tv and go to sleep."

- They are too old.

  "A lot of people don't want to retrain when they get to a certain age. Once they get 50 or something years old and lose a job, a lot of people just don't want to retrain."

  "If you're over 40 years old, how do you start over again."

  "I'm getting to the age, too, where if I lose my job it's going to be hard to pick up another job."

- They don't want to start over again.

  "If you leave a job and go somewhere else, you'd be starting all over. They just don't start you right out at the top, like when you've got 16 years senority."

  "Coping with entry level is not something I really want to try and visualize."

- They don't know if it would really help.

  "Why start over? Retrain for what? You're 45 years old. Retrain and you're competing with a 22-year-old kid who is just out of school."

  "Like in my case. I was a dock worker. And when you lift ten catalogs from Wards eight hours a day at a constant speed, your head is pounding from the constant noise; your fingers are numb; you can't hear. And you think about going to school. It's useless. And then you say, 'I'm going to learn computers because some day I don't have to deal with these catalogs. I'll be looking at a nice computer.' But you don't know if it's going to help you or not. By the time you get through learning the computer, there are guys much more qualified that you that are willing to work at half the price, so forget it."

  "If you're talking about advancing and going up, if you're going to make $25,000 or $30,000 a year, yes, I would go back to school and train if it's going to pay this type of money. But if you're not going to make that type of money, if it's going to be a little more than what you're doing, I don't think it's worth it."

  "If they put a salary up there on what these specific jobs are going to pay, that would get a lot of people interested -especially if it's a high salary job. But I don't think you would get people to retrain to make the same thing."

IV. BREAKING DOWN THE BARRIERS

Given the defensiveness and denial evidenced in these sessions, successfully communicating to these workers represents a particular challenge. How do we motivate and instill hope rather than turn them off?

It is essential to take the problem down to a personal, day-to-day level. A **micro, not a macro approach** works best. The macro approach makes it too easy for them to activate their denial mechanism, to feel that "this won't happen to me."

> "I guess I don't want to buckle down and do those things if I don't have do."
>
> "Sure you dream. You look at magazines and say, 'I might want to do that.' But you put in your eight hours and go home and have a beer."

Confront specific problems and concerns rather than speak of long-term benefits. This is what matters to most people.

Several years ago, a major advertising agency was hired to develop a campaign to encourage enlistment in the new all-volunteer Army. The creative department's proposal was to use successful businessman as spokespeople and show the army as a first step in a wonderful career. However, when the agency's research department began talking to the young men who were the target of the campaign, they learned that what mattered to them were day-to-day issues: How much will I be paid? How much leave will I get? How short will my hair be cut? Can I keep my car? Can I wear civilian clothes off-duty?

In our own interviews, similar day-to-day concerns were paramount:

> "What hours are these courses available. Would they have training in the evening and the day?"

"Do you go to a school or is is more like on-the-job training?"

"How much time would be involved and how many hours a week am I going to have to spend there?"

"Could you keep your old job while you're being trained?"

"What about child care for my kids?"

"Is there a certain age? Will they train anybody?"

"How much could I earn after I'm retrained?"

Only after such immediate concerns are satisfied can longer-term needs or goals be addressed.

For this reason, assurance of a **short time frame** is important. When they think about retraining, most workers tend to think of a major upheaval in their lives and a long-term commitment -- years, rather than weeks or months.

"The other thing about most of that retraining they want you to do, again, you have to go back so many years to school to make up before you can get into most of the programs."

They need to know this is not necessarily the case.

Talk in terms of **options and opportunities.** The word "retraining" appears to have especially negative connotations. It means starting over from scratch, going back to the beginning again; writing off all they have learned and done thus far.

In this opening up of options, people will be hearing a new message. Many feel perhaps they have no options.

"You shouldn't jump from one job to another. You're better to stay in the department where you're at. Keep working on that job, because that's where they really want you.

"Somebody tells you, 'This is what you're going to do' and you do that."

They do not really own the problem and are more than ready to play the victim — to blame the company or government policies, for example.

> "The company has everyone over the barrel. There's so many people looking for a job. And they say, 'Accept this or that's it.'"
>
> "Many companies, it's like hanging a carrot in front of you. But you never get what you think you were going to get."
>
> "I don't like the job. The idea was to move up into something else. Instead, they laid half the people off."
>
> "We are almost powerless. We have very little power to change things. They say you can change things by voting. I am very apathetic about the vote. What's one more vote."

And look to someone else to help them if things change.

> "They have a clause in the contract that if your job is eliminated the company has to retrain you."
>
> "There would be something that we could take over. They're good to their people. There would be another job they could put us on making the same salary. They are good at that. They stand behind their word."

For perhaps the first time they will be hearing that they are responsible for themselves and that they have the ability to take control of their lives.

Finally, it is important to discuss not just the problem or process, but the **end result.** "You can get the job you want" seems to be a meaningful claim and one that those who have already experienced retraining — those profiled in Part One of this study — would readily agree with.

> "I think the best reason to retrain is so you can do something you actually enjoy doing. There's nothing worse than going to work 40 hours a week where you hate it and you watch the clock. You can't get enough done. The clock stays the same."

V. THE FINAL STIMULUS

Many do not see the opportunities because they are not aware of, or fully understand, their options. They have no pattern to follow, no idea of how to get help or even what to ask. It is as if someone was asking them to drive from New York to St. Louis without a map when they have only the vaguest idea of where St. Louis may be.

Thus, there is clearly a need for a **central source of help and information.**

One concept suggested was a "clearinghouse" that could provide counseling, access to training and placement opportunities.

> "I think there's a lot of people out there that would, if they had some way of finding out about it, would take training."
>
> "There should be a clearinghouse some place where they could go, where people could go and find out about the programs and on-the-job training."

One person summed it up this way:

> "First I walk in and say that this is what I've been doing so far, and I'm afraid maybe this company is going to fold or I'm afraid it's growing bigger and I want to go somewhere else. I want to get a better position or more money. So what can I do, or what are the things I could learn in order to better myself. So initial counseling, somebody to be able to tell me this. Then I would want to have somebody who could give me options whether they are night schools, like there are six things you could do and it's going to cost this much. It's going to involve so much of your time, and this is what you could get out of it. I want to know what kind of school I'm going to go to, what it's going to cost, and when I come out what kind of paper am I going to have in my hand, and not just a paper, what kind of knowledge I'm going to have to be able to apply myself somewhere else. And the third thing is, somebody should be able to tell me what's available out in the market. Not to say that you've got a job here, but these are the companies that have hired this kind of people. These are the three basic things I would want to have in the center."

Time and again, those we talked to expressed support for this idea -especially if initial contact could be made by phone. This made the prospect of investigating possibilities seem easier and risk-free.

However, it is important that it be made clear that this is a service for all and not limited to the unemployed or those on welfare.

> "That would be a switch, to help somebody that's working. That's what irks me right now. Once you're working, you can't get any help. But if you're not working, sitting home, you can get all kinds of help."

And it should be free of charge and free of bias. The plethora of ads to train people for jobs as truck drivers and computer operators creates confusion and distrust of offers of help.

> "The thing about when they say call this number, usually you think it's just some school trying to get business. If it's somebody trying to help you and not make money off you, then that point needs to be brought across."

> "It has to be emphasized that it is free and it is a public service, that it isn't bullshit."

> "We've got so many things on tv now, all the electronic schools, bulldozing schools, all this stuff. Right off when I first see this on tv, I'm going to think it's just another one of these gimmicks."

A community job-training clearinghouse might provide the final stimulus many of these individuals need to break through the pyschological barriers they have erected on the path to retraining.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The best time to begin retraining is before layoffs occur. Yet, reaching and motivating those likely to be displaced by the introduction of new technolgies and the impact of foreign competition represents an extremely difficult task.

When counseling these individuals, it is important to:

- Talk in terms of "options" or "opportunities" rather than the more negative "retraining" with its implication of regressing or starting from scratch.

- Recognize that the idea of options may be a new one to many. For perhaps the first time they will be hearing that they are responsible for themselves and that they can change what they have up to now accepted as the routine of their lives.

- Emphasize that retraining is a socially acceptable resource. Even when aware of programs, too often individuals feel that to use them would be humiliating and represent taking welfare or charity.

- Use a micro, not a macro approach. Discuss problems and solutions on a personal, day-to-day level.

- Address an individual's specific concerns and practical needs, especially finances, time commitments and the realistic prospect for improving his or her job situation.

- Assure a short time frame for results — weeks or months — rather than the years that people assume.

- Show the end result, the successful outcome, not just the process.

- Emphasize that everyone should take advantage of all available opportunities for additional training in order to prepare themselves for advancement in their present job or to move into new fields where demand is expanding.

Even when persuaded that thinking about their job future is something they should do, many seem to lack sufficient motivation to work through the maze and learn what programs exist and how they apply to their situation.

Individuals who need additional training, retraining or related services must have simple and immediate access to local institutions and agencies most likely to meet those needs.

A central source of information on the variety of retraining programs and services available within the community should be established if one does not already exist.

This resource should be comprehensive and include counseling and an assessment of potential employment opportunities as well as provide access to retraining.

Such information needs to be provided in a way that is tailored to individual needs; for example, part-time programs or the availability of applicable grants.

The service needs to be available at times convenient for workers who often do not have access to telephones during the work day.

It should be widely publicized and all communications should stress that it is a free, unbiased, service open to all.